

Priest abuse scandal is recalled

Events in Rochester mirror those recounted in hit film

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Spoiler alert: This article contains information about the ending of the film *Spotlight*.

Roman Catholics in the Rochester region were stunned when the Rev. Eugene Emo, a priest who had served in a dozen area churches and hospitals over the course of 35 years, was placed under arrest in February 1996.

Father Emo, then 60 years old, a beloved figure to some parishioners but already a subject of scorn to others, was charged with sexual abuse. He was hauled out of a rectory on Oxford Street in the city in handcuffs.

What followed was a chain of events that mirrored, in more ways than one, the story told in the hit film *Spotlight*. That film, which is getting a good deal of Best Picture Oscar buzz, depicts a year-long investigation by the *Boston Globe* newspaper of sexual abuse by priests and attempts by church officials in that city to cover up that activity.

As the film relates, the newspaper had written before about abusive priests in Boston. Some of that coverage had been quite extensive. But until the *Spotlight* team began its work, reporters had never connected the dots by examining the scope of the problem and the Boston archdiocese's handling of it.

Spotlight culminates with the January 2002

publication of the investigative team's first story, which exposes the presence of dozens of abusive priests in the archdiocese who had been reassigned, placed on leave or allowed to retire rather than being punished by the church and the law for their misconduct. As the film ends, scrolling text describes the reaction to the *Globe's* Pulitzer Prize-winning reportage and lists the many American cities in which priest-abuse scandals ensued.

Rochester, New York is on that list. A review of the *Democrat and Chronicle's* clip files reveals that what happened here is exactly parallel to events in Boston.

Before Father Emo's arrest, the *Democrat and Chronicle* and its now-closed sister paper, the *Times-Union*, had covered the cases of at least four priests accused of sexual abuse.

The Rev. Gerard Guli of Holy Rosary Church in Rochester and the Rev. Thomas Corbett of St. Theodore's Church in Gates were arrested by police on sex-abuse charges in 1989 and 1991, respectively. Neither was convicted. Both left their churches and Guli left the priesthood. Corbett remained a priest and worked in the diocesan offices until at least 2002.

In the summer of 1993, a woman filed a sex-abuse civil suit against Brother John Heathwood, a popular teacher at Bishop Kearney High School in Irondequoit. A few months later, the Rev. Robert Winterkorn resigned his pastoral post at



FILE PHOTOGRAPH
The Rev. Eugene Emo, arrested in February 1996 on sexual abuse charges.

St. John the Evangelist Church in Spencerport after acknowledging a sexual relationship with an adult woman.

Winterkorn's privileges were removed, according to Bishop Matthew Clark, and he died in 2005. The lawsuit against Heathwood was eventually dismissed, and he retired from teaching in 1993. Heathwood was a member of the Christian Brothers, so he was not subject to oversight by the Rochester Diocese.

Then came Father Emo's case in 1996. Within days of his arrest, the *Democrat and Chronicle* was reporting that he'd been removed from St. Januarius Church in Naples, Ontario County, three years earlier because of parishioners' concerns about missing money and his behavior with boys — wrestling, grappling, handcuffing. The newspaper found people who remembered similar inappropriate conduct when Emo was pastor at St. Cecilia's Church in Irondequoit many years earlier. It came out that Emo



STATE OF FLORIDA
Emo is now living in Florida. The photograph is from his page on the state sex offender registry.

had been moved from one assignment to another, and at times assigned to posts where he'd have no contact with young people, because of his behavior.

"If a priest breaks his vows with a woman, he's out of the priesthood. But if they play around with children or with another man, they just get transferred to another parish," the newspaper quoted a member of the Naples church's parish council as saying. "This is a scandal in the church and in society today that's just beyond my comprehension. It's Satan at work."

The newspapers also reported on the diocese's reaction to Emo's arrest, and the editorial pages of both papers were mildly critical of Bishop Matthew Clark for not doing enough to address predatory priests. But no major investigations were undertaken.

As Emo's case was working through the courts, another priest —

the Rev. William Lum, the former pastor at Our Lady of Mercy Church in Greece — was arrested on sodomy charges after a young male parishioner reported he'd been forced by Lum to engage in sexual conduct. Lum pleaded guilty in 1997 but remained a priest and worked in the diocesan office until at least 2002.

Emo, who had been accused of sexually abusing an adult man who was developmentally disabled in Cohocton, Steuben County, pleaded guilty and was sentenced in May 1997 to six months in Steuben County Jail. At his sentencing, he apologized for "the terrible damage I feel I have done."

With that, the issue of priest sexual abuse seemed to disappear from the pages of Rochester's newspapers. The only exception was in 1999, when Emo violated his probation by being found alone with a teenage boy. He was sentenced to one to three years in state prison. Now 80 years old, Emo lives near Orlando, Florida, and is registered as a sex offender.

In this — coverage of individual sex-abuse cases, sometimes a lot of coverage, but no examination of systemic problems — the *Democrat and Chronicle* was like the *Boston Globe* and other American newspapers in the years before 2002.

Interestingly, a 1996 *Democrat and Chronicle* story about Emo featured an interview with former priest turned psychotherapist named Richard Sipe. Then a professor at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Sipe is among the nation's leading experts on sexual abuse by clergy. The story notes that Sipe's studies had

found that 6 percent of all Roman Catholic priests engage in sexual activity with minors at some point.

It is not clear if that figure resonated with Rochester reporters. But in *Spotlight*, Sipe plays a key role. In a phone conversation recreated in the film, he relates his 6-percent estimate to a *Globe* reporter. This proves a crucial bit of evidence that propels the journalists forward. Doing the math, they calculated that Sipe's estimate would yield 90 abusive priests in Boston. They had only found 13 at that point, but Sipe's research encouraged them to dig for more cases. They eventually found 87.

After the *Globe* published their first story in January 2002, it unleashed a flurry of national attention. Reporters in Rochester and elsewhere began to retrace the *Spotlight* team's steps, uncovering cases of abusive priests, connecting the dots, and pressuring church leaders to be more transparent about how it handled allegations of sexual abuse by its priests.

By May 2002, Bishop Clark acknowledged to the *Democrat and Chronicle* that at least six priests had been removed amid allegations of sexual misconduct, and he later acknowledged others.

In June of 2012, the Diocese of Rochester acknowledged that a number of priests has been "removed from ministry" since 2002. As the *Democrat and Chronicle* reported, that list contained 23 names.

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